

The New Testament, Book 25

III John

The third of John's epistles is even more personal than his second epistle. John addresses this letter to one "Gaius, whom I love in the truth"; and in it he deals with a problem in the church between two men named Demetrius, and Diotrophes. In his closing, John expresses his hope that he will soon visit Gaius and his church. As is the case with the church of the "elect lady" of II John, the church in which Gaius seems to be a leader is unknown. However, it is most likely one of the churches of Asia Minor, in the bishopric of Ephesus, where John lived and ministered for 30 years at the end of his life, and where he wrote his gospel, three epistles, and Revelation.

A. Author. The human author of III John is John the elder, "the apostle of love," who also wrote I and II John, the gospel that bears his name, and Revelation. As is the case with his gospel and the other two epistles, John does not identify himself. In Revelation, he will.

B. Place and Date. This epistle, like his other two epistles and his gospel, was probably written at Ephesus, about 80-90 AD¹.

C. Occasion. The primary occasion for III John is to encourage and advise his friend, Gaius, concerning a conflict in the church where he is the consecrated leader, and to warn the trouble-maker, who apparently is trying to take complete, dictatorial control of the church. It appears that this trouble-maker, one Diotrophes, had even intercepted a previous letter from John and rejected the intention of John and some of his disciples to visit the church; he has even been casting out of the congregation those who disagree with him. Although this is indeed a crisis letter, John seems to be unruffled by the situation, and he fully intends to deal with it in person.

John also takes the occasion to praise and encourage the church in its hospitality to traveling Christians, and in all such well-doing.

D. Theme. The theme of the epistle is again two-fold: walking in truth; and hospitality to traveling Christians. As in II John (q.v.), truth might also be considered a theme; it appears three times in the first three verses².

E. Highlights. Highlights of III John include the following:

¹ John probably first wrote (or dictated) his gospel in Hebrew, in Jerusalem, during the years that Mary was living with him, after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. It is likely that he wrote (or dictated) the Greek version at Ephesus, during the last 30 years of his life.

² In II John "truth" appears five times in the first four verses.

1. Prosper and Be in Health. (Verses 1-2)

John greets Gaius, and calls him “the well-beloved”; it appears that Gaius is a good man, loved and respected by many. John expresses his love for Gaius “in truth,” and his desire that he may prosper and be in good physical health, even as he prospers and grows spiritually³.

2. No Greater Joy. (Verses 3-4)

John speaks of the joy he experienced when he heard from some in Gaius’ church that he is faithful and walking in truth. Then John, once again, expresses a fundamental fact of spiritual life in one brief verse. Speaking of his spiritual children in verse 4, he declares that he has no greater joy than to hear that these children are walking in truth. All Christian parents can identify with this classic verse⁴. No matter what else may be right about our lives, our joy cannot be complete if all of our children are not living and walking in truth, serving the One who is Truth Himself. Conversely, when our children **are** “walking in truth,” all of the difficulties, trials and disappointments of life are decidedly secondary⁵.

3. Support for Traveling Evangelists. (Verses 5-8)

John commends Gaius and the others in the church who provide support for needy brethren, especially for evangelists who are traveling in the area. Good reports of this have been coming to John. It is important to support the traveling evangelists, so that they can preach and minister to the Gentiles, taking nothing from them.

***NOTE:** It is helpful to remind ourselves that these Churches around Ephesus, for which John had particular concern, had their beginnings as Jewish churches, in Gentile surroundings. Paul followed the same policy-- of taking no support from the unredeemed Gentiles to whom he preached-- supporting himself when necessary, as a tent-maker.*

4. The Man Who Would Be Dictator. (Verses 9-12)

John now turns to the dictatorial trouble-maker, Diotrophes. This evil man, he says, loves to have pre-eminence, to be looked upon as the most important person in the church, and wishes to exercise dictatorial control. John says that he has previously written to the church, but Diotrephes had

³ Some Christians interpret v 2 as a general promise to all believers that they should expect to prosper and be in good physical health, as they grow spiritually. I will neither affirm nor dispute their belief, except to point out the fact that in v 2 "thou" is singular, and obviously refers to Gaius.

⁴ **Complete this (or delete it) after Marty brings the old floppy disc version of the evolving study guide from my office in Marion)**

⁵ This principle also holds true for childless Christians, concerning their spiritual children.

opposed a visit from John and some of his disciples⁶. He says that this evil man not only opposes hospitality and support for the traveling preachers, but casts out of the congregation those who disagree.

Diotrophes is a classic example of a despotic, self-serving leader who seeks to control those around him--the very opposite of what a Christian leader should be, and the antithesis of the example of Jesus. John says that when he does visit the church of Gaius he will deal with Diotrophes, and he again expresses a fundamental rule. He says that we should judge (evaluate) leaders and follow those who do good, not those who do evil (which should be obvious). He is pretty clearly referring to Diotrophes, and he goes on to say that one who practices evil is not of God--hasn't even seen God (is not truly redeemed).

On the other hand, John commends another man in the church there, one Demetrius. This man, he says, has a widespread good reputation among the believers, and that his good reputation is confirmed by the truth of Scripture itself. John adds to this commendation of Demetrius his own testimony and that of those around him.

***NOTE:** There is a valid principle in living--particularly for Christians but applicable to all--that is so important that it is difficult to over-emphasize it. This principle is that anyone who seeks the control of others is wrong, and probably dangerous. Seeking the control of others is a sickness, and it is a sin. Control of others is the essence of witchcraft, and is an abomination to God. The essence of the agape love of God is to serve one another; its opposite, to seek to control others, is ongoing wickedness, and destructive to those so controlled.*

5. In Closing. (Verses 13-14)

John closes by saying that he will write no more because he hopes to see Gaius and the church there soon, wishes him peace, sends greetings from those with John, and then makes an interesting request. He asks Gaius to "Greet the friends by name." The meaning of this request is not clear; but it could mean that John wishes to have Gaius greet each one for him individually--not just to bring greetings to the group. He seems to want each of the faithful believers there to be reminded that John the aged elder loves him.

⁶ Thus we know (v 9) that John wrote at least one epistle that was not chosen by the Church Fathers to be included in the inspired canon of Scripture. It is more likely that it was lost (perhaps destroyed by Diotrophes).